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ABSTRACT

Social interaction may be construed as a process of mutual and reciprocal interpersonal influence. Counseling and psychotherapy are not different from other types of social interaction in this regard. Counselors influence clients and clients influence counselors. This study investigated the dynamics and patterning of social influence and relational control between a counselor and client across a 12-session counseling case. Counselor and client verbal utterances were coded in terms of their implied relational positions (one-up, one-down, one-across) using Heatherington's (1985) modification of Erickson and Rogers' (1973) relational coding system. A measure of the degree of dependence/contingency between counselor and client responses served as an index of social influence and relational control. Variations in the degree of contingency between responses were plotted across the 12 sessions and evidenced three distinct phases of the counseling process. Results indicated the vast majority of responses were one-across, responses which minimize or neutralize the relational control aspect of communication. The counselor was shown to be more domineering than the client, though not necessarily dominant. Although this study was based on a single case, it did confirm previous research. Twenty-eight references are appended. (Author/ABL)

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A Study of the Dynamics of Social Influence in Counseling

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Presented at the annual convention of the American Psychological Association, Washington, DC, August, 1986.

A Study of the Dynamics of Social
Influence in Counseling

Abstract

This study investigated the dynamics and patterning of social influence and relational control between a counselor and client across a 12-session counseling case. Counselor and client verbal utterances were coded in terms of their implied relational positions (one-up, one-down, one-across) using Heatherington's (1985) modification of Erickson and Rogers' (1973) relational coding system. A measure of the degree of dependence/contingency between counselor and client responses served as an index of social influence and relational control. Variations in the degree of contingency between responses were plotted across the 12 sessions and evidenced three distinct phases of the counseling process.

A Study of the Dynamics of Social
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Persons are said to be "interacting" (in contrast to simply "behaving") whenever they respond in a contingent manner with respect to each other. Although the degree of contingency among interactants' responses may vary depending on the interactants, the context, and the nature of the responses, to the extent that each person's behavior is contingent upon the behavior of the other, social interaction may be construed as a process of mutual and reciprocal interpersonal influence.

Counseling and psychotherapy are not different from other types of social interaction in this regard. Counselors influence clients and clients influence counselors. Clients come to counselors for help and ask to be influenced, and counselors seek to influence their clients by their helping behaviors. At the same time, clients influence the ways in which their counselors give that help.

Olson and his colleagues (Olson & Rabunsky, 1972; Olson & Cromwell, 1975), although discussing social influence in terms of "power" and within the limited context of the family, provide a useful framework within which to organize our thinking about social influence in counseling. Specifically, they view social influence as a generic concept which consists of three interrelated but distinct domains. The first domain refers to

the potential to influence on the basis of "resources" available to the person in order to affect social outcomes. The second domain of social influence refers to the interaction process (i.e., the message exchange), through which attempts to influence are exerted, accepted or resisted. And the third domain of influence refers to the afater-the-fact conclusion about influence in terms of social consequences. The three domains of social influence are labeled power base, power process, and power outcome, respectively.

By far most of the theorizing and research with respect to social influence in counseling and psychotherapy has focused on the power base and power outcome domains of Olson's framework. Strong's (1968) seminal paper on "counseling as an interpersonal influence process," the elaboration of the ideas presented in that paper by Strong and Matross (1973), and the now extensive research literature which was spawned by those papers (see e.g., Corrigan, Dell, Lewis & Schmidt, 1980), clearly reflect a "power base" orientation to social influence in counseling.

At the same time, the work of Carson (1969) and the ideas stimulated by his text (e.g., Anchin, 1982; Carson, 1973; Cashban, 1973) generally reflect a "power outcome" orientation with respect to social interaction and social influence in counseling.

With the exceptions of the very recent works of Friedlander and Phillips (1984), and Tracey and Ray (1984), who respectively studied patterns of interactive of discourse and topic determination within counseling interaction, there appears to be little work, either theoretical or empirical, on social influence

from a power process perspective--particularly as pertains to social influence within counseling. In this regard, it was the purpose of this study to investigate the process dynamics of social influence vis-a-vis relational control in counseling across a full-length counseling case.

Relational control, as it is usually defined and as it is used in this instance, refers to the control of the relational positions members of an interacting dyad assume with respect to each other (Watzlawick, Beavin & Jackson, 1967). In complementary relationships, a person may be in dominant or "superior" or "one-up" position with respect to the other, or in a subordinant, "inferior" or "one-down" position. In symmetrical relationships, relational role differences are minimized through the exchange of similar (rather than complementing) interactive behaviors. Such relationships may nevertheless evidence relationship control struggles as the interactants compete for either a one-up or a one-down position with respect to the other person.

An individual's relational control (or influence) may be defined as the extent to which his or her relational posturing determines or influences the relational posturing or responding of the other. Said another way, the "controlling" (one-up) individual is the person whose behavior has the most effect on the other--either by exciting or by inhibiting the subsequent occurrences of certain behaviors of the other; and the "controlled" (one-down) individual is the person whose behavior is most contingent or dependent on the occurrence of certain

antecedent behaviors of the other.

Conflicting views have been expressed with respect to the dynamics of relational control within counseling. Haley (1963) has proposed that in successful counseling, counselors must remain in control across counseling, never letting the client gain an "upper hand." Cashdan (1973), however, drawing upon Haley's writings, posits a series of stages within the counseling process across which counselor control may vary. Tracey and Ray's (1984) empirical investigation of the dynamics of topic determination (an index of control) across successful and unsuccessful counseling dyads, found successful counseling to be characterized by replicable stages of topical control by counselors and the clients.

The present study undertook to investigate specifically the degrees of contingency between counselor and client relational responses and between client and counselor relational responses (Note: the two are not the same) and the variations in these degrees of contingency within and across the interviews of a single counseling case--i.e., to study the sequence and patterning of social influence and relational control in an actual counseling case.

METHOD

Data

The data which were analyzed for this study were derived from a single complete counseling case consisting of 12 counseling interviews. The case was the same case analyzed by Hill, Carter and O'Farrell (1983) in their study of the process

and outcome of time-limited counseling. In this case, both the client (a 20 year old undergraduate student) and the counselor (a 5th year post-doctoral counselor) were women. A verbatim transcription of each of the 12 counseling sessions was obtained for use in this study by writing to these authors.

Procedure

The transcribed interviews were coded by two independent raters using Ericson and Rogers' (1973) relational coding system (as modified for use in analyzing therapeutic interaction by Heatherington, 1985). Using this system, each counselor and client utterance (speaking turn) was coded as to its relational control direction. Responses that suggested movement toward dominance were coded "one-up"; response that suggested movement toward being controlled by seeking or accepting the dominance of the other were coded "one-down"; and responses that were neither a move toward control nor being controlled or which suggested movement toward neutralizing control were coded "one-across."

The sequence of counselor and client relational control codes for each interview were then organized into separate contingency matrices, such that the rows of the matrices referred to the antecedent responses and the columns referred to the consequent responses. Doing so revealed which counselor responses were followed by which client responses, and which client responses were followed by which counselor responses.

Data analysis

The degree of contingency between counselor and client (and client and counselor) responses within each interview was determined using the ambiguity index derived from Shannon and

Weaver's (1949) mathematical theory of communication [so-called "information theory" (see Attneave, 1959; Lichtenberg & Tyndall, 1985; Losey, 1978)]. The ambiguity index provides a measure of the uncertainty of a response (consequent) when the preceding response (antecedent) is known. The larger the ambiguity index for a given set of antecedents and consequents, the greater the uncertainty of the consequents given that set of antecedents. The less certain the consequent responses are, given the antecedent responses, ,the less influential or controlling are the antecedent responses. By comparing the ambiguity of the client's responses (given the counselor's antecedent responses) with the ambiguity of the counselor's responses (given the clietn's antecedent responses), it becomes possible to determine the relative influence or control each person has with respect to the other's responding and therefore on the relationship. The individual having the larger ambiguity index (i.e., the more response uncertainty) is the lesser controlled or influenced individual in the interaction.

To provide a measure of each interactant's relative influence over the counseling relationship, the ambiguity index for the client's responses was subtracted from the index computed for the counselor's responses. A positive (+) value suggested the counselor to be less controlled (and therefore more controlling) than the client; a negative (-) value suggested the opposite.

The indices of relative influence were plotted across the 12 counseling sessions and variations in the measure of relative

influence were inspected for patterns which might be suggestive of stages of relational control.

RESULTS

Table 1 summarizes the frequencies and proportions of counselor and client one-up, one-across, and one-down responses across the full case. Across the 12 interviews, the one-across

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Insert Table 1 about here

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response category was the most frequently used response by both the counselor and client. Such responding is indicative of efforts by both the counselor and the client to level or minimize the relational position implications in their interaction. This finding is consistent with the findings of Lichtenberg and Barke (1980) in their study of relational responding in initial interviews.

The counselor and client differed, however, in their use of one-up and one-down responses: the counselor used one-up responses 21% of the time and one-down responses only 6% of the time; the client used one-up responses only 3% of the time and one-down responses 35% of the time. Despite the previously noted tendency toward "neutralizing" relational control by both the counselor and the client, based on their apparent complementary responding vis-a-vis their one-up/one-down responses (at least as revealed by the simple noncontingent responding of the two participants), it would appear that across the 12 interviews the counselor may have held a one-up position with respect to the

client.

From an interactional perspective, however, "dominance" or control (one-upmanship) is defined in terms of the interactants' contingent responding. Table 2 summarizes the counselor-client and client-counselor response contingency frequencies and proportions. The results suggest that, in general, if the

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Insert Table 2 about here

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counselor's prior response were one-up, the client tended to respond with a one-down response 68% of the time, suggesting client acceptance of a move toward control by the counselor. If the counselor made a one-across statement, the client tended to respond in kind, with another one-across statement on the average of 75% of the time. A one-down statement by the counselor was generally followed by either a one-across statement (58% of the time) or a one-down statement (35% of the time). Both response patterns indicate a minimization of control or lack of acceptance of control on the client's part.

When the client was the antecedent speaker and the counselor the consequent speaker, a different pattern emerged. If the client offered a one-up statement (a relatively rare occurrence), the counselor responded with a one-across statement (47% of the time), indicating a neutralization or minimization of the control aspect of the interaction. A one-across statement by the client was generally followed (78% of the time) by a one-across statement by the counselor. Finally, one-down statements by the client tended to be followed by one-across statements by the

counselor (65% of the time). It appears that the counselor's responses tended to be one-across regardless of the prior responses of the client, while the client responses tended to vary depending upon the prior counselor response. This pattern of contingent responding provides some suggestion that the client's responses tended to be more dependent upon the counselor's than vice versa. The greater independence of the counselor's responses suggests greater control of the client's responding by the counselor.

Certain patterns of influence can be observed by comparing the simple unconditional frequencies and probabilities (Table 1) with the conditional frequencies and probabilities presented in Table 2. The unconditional probability of a counselor making a one-up response was .21; however, this probability increased to .32 when the preceding client response was one-up. The unconditional probability of a counselor one-across response was .73; but the likelihood of such a response decreased sharply to .47 following a client one-up response. One-down responses by the counselor were infrequent (.06); however, their likelihood of occurrence increased sharply to .21 when the client's previous response was one-up.

The influence of counselor responding on the client can be studied similarly. For example, the unconditional probability of a client one-down response was .35; however, its probability of occurrence was strongly influenced by the immediately preceding occurrence of a counselor one-up statement (.68). Overall, however, the degree of influence of the counselor or client upon

the responding of the other is difficult to judge at this point. It is obvious, however, that both participants evidenced some degree of influence upon the relational responding of the other.

Table 3 summarizes the counselor and client response ambiguity indices for the 12 counseling sessions. The difference (counselor minus the client) in these indices is also presented in the table.

Insert Table 3 about here

Figure 1 is a graphic presentation of these differences in ambiguity indices for the counselor and client across the 12 counseling sessions. Positive difference scores indicate that the counselor evidenced more control over the client's responding than vice versa; negative scores indicate that the client evidenced more control over the counselor's responding. Inspection of the data suggests the possibility of three stages to the counseling proecess in this case: The first stage (sessions 1-3) is characterized by a minimization of difference in control between the counselor and the client--a equitable sharing of influence as the two interactants negotiate (or struggle to define) the therapeutic relationship. The second stage (sessions 4-9) is characterized by a rather pronounced and persistent dominance by the counselor over the client's relational responding--evidence, perhaps of Cashdan's (1973) "stripping" stage of therapy wherein the client is stripped of her heretofore symptomatic response patterns or during which the counselor, as a therapeutic ploy, begins to deliberately respond

to the client in unexpected and "asocial" ways (Young & Beier, 1982). In the third and final stage (sessions 7-12), relational control positions again become minimized. That the counselor appears to exert slightly more influence in the final two sessions appears consistent with the information reported by Hill, et al. (1983) which indicated that the client was reluctant to leave the counseling relationship and may have evoked increased efforts by the counselor to deal with her resistence to termination.

DISCUSSION

Several of the findings in this study deserve particular elaboration. First, the results of the analyses indicate that the vast majority of client and counselor responses were one-across. As noted earlier, one-across responses are those responses that minimize or neutralize the relational control aspect of communication (Ericson & Rogers, 1973). There are a number of interpretations to consider regarding this finding. In this study, both the counselor and client were female. Orlinsky and Howard (1976), as well as Tryon (1983), have noted that female counselor-client dyads share a high degree of mutual satisfaction with treatment and emphasize affiliation over competitive aspects of the relationship. Based on this information, Heatherington and Allen (1984) hypothesized that female counselor-client dyads would evidence neutral symmetrical relational control patterns in which the definition of control would not be a central issue in their interaction. Heatherington and Allen failed to find statistical significance to support this hypothesis; however, they did note that the data were in the

expected direction. Moreover, Heatherington and Allen found that female counselors and clients showed an overall higher frequency of one-across or leveling control codes in their interactions than did male-male or cross-gender dyads. They interpreted this finding as support for the notion that female counseling dyads were more likely to be neutral with respect to the issue of relational control.

Heatherington and Allen (1984), as well as Lichtenberg and Barke (1981), found a predominance of one-across control codes within their studies of initial counseling interviews. This study replicated and extended this finding in that a predominance of one-across control codes was found throughout the entire counseling case. Ericson and Rogers (1973) believed that, at least in marital interaction, the one-across category function as a category into which only an unimportantly small proportion of responses would fall. The findings of the studies cited above, as well as the present study, indicate that this assumption is clearly not the case--at least not in counseling.

Dance (1976) has noted three primary functions of human communication: (a) regulation or control, (b) linking or affiliation, and (c) mentation or intra-individual cognitive processes. One-across responses, as minimizers of relational control, appear to serve an affiliative or linking function in communication; and to the extent that counseling interaction may be characterized as "affiliative communication," the preponderance of such responses in counseling may be understandable. Such a position is contrary, however, to the

view generally attributed to communication or interaction theorists vis-a-vis counseling and psychotherapy (e.g., Haley, 1963; Strong & Claiborn, 1982).

A second finding relates to the distinction made between dominance and domineeringness in interpersonal communication (Courtright, Millar & Rogers-Millar, 1979). "Domineeringness" refers to the type(s) of individual responses that interactants make, while "dominance" refers to the characteristics of the interpersonal transactions. Domineering behavior is defined as the transmission of one-up messages, which are in turn defined as maneuvers toward relational control. A move toward control by one interactant may either be accepted or challenged by the other. Dominance, on the other hand, is defined as the transmission of one-up messages that are followed (accepted) by the other with one-down responses. In this respect, domineeringiness is an aspect of individual behavior, while dominance is an aspect of relational behavior.

In the present study, the counselor was shown to be more domineering than the client; however, examination of the conditional responding of the participants indicated that the client had a significant impact on the occurrence of counselor one-up responses--especially when the client's antecedent response was one-up. In this regard, despite her domineeringness, the counselor was not necessarily dominant. This was particularly apparent when inspecting the pattern of relational control across all 12 sessions. Clearly dominance fluctuated across the sessions, with five of the sessions actually evidencing a preponderance of client influence

(dominance).

Being based on the study of a single counseling case, the findings of this study must necessarily be considered to be of limited generalizability (Hersen & Barlow, 1976). Its "confirmation" of the stage sequences/patterns postulated by Cashdan (1973) and its concurrence with the stage sequence/pattern found by Tracey and Ray (1985) to characterize successful time-limited counseling, lend credibility and legitimacy to these findings. This study's corroboration of findings presented in Lichtenberg and Barke (1981) and Heatherington and Allen (1984) also provides substantiation for the present findings.

Finally, it is important to note that the study itself was an attempt to explore the dynamics of the process of control and social influence within counseling. The method used permitted the study of social influence within the counseling process to move from investigation which is based simply upon the characteristics of the individual interactants (power base) or on evaluations of the outcome of the interactions (power outcome), to the study of the influence which occurs within interaction between persons and which generates the eventual outcome.

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Table 1

Summary of counselor and client response occurrences across the counseling case. (Numbers in parentheses are the the proportions of occurrence for each response type for each respondent.)

	Response Type			
Speaker	One-up	One-across	One-down	Total
Counselor	800 (.21)	2808 (.73)	228 (.06)	3836
Client	128 (.03)	2367 (.62)	1343 (.35)	3838
Total	928 (.12)	5175 (.67)	1571 (.20)	7674

Table 2

Counselor-client response contingency frequencies and probabilities

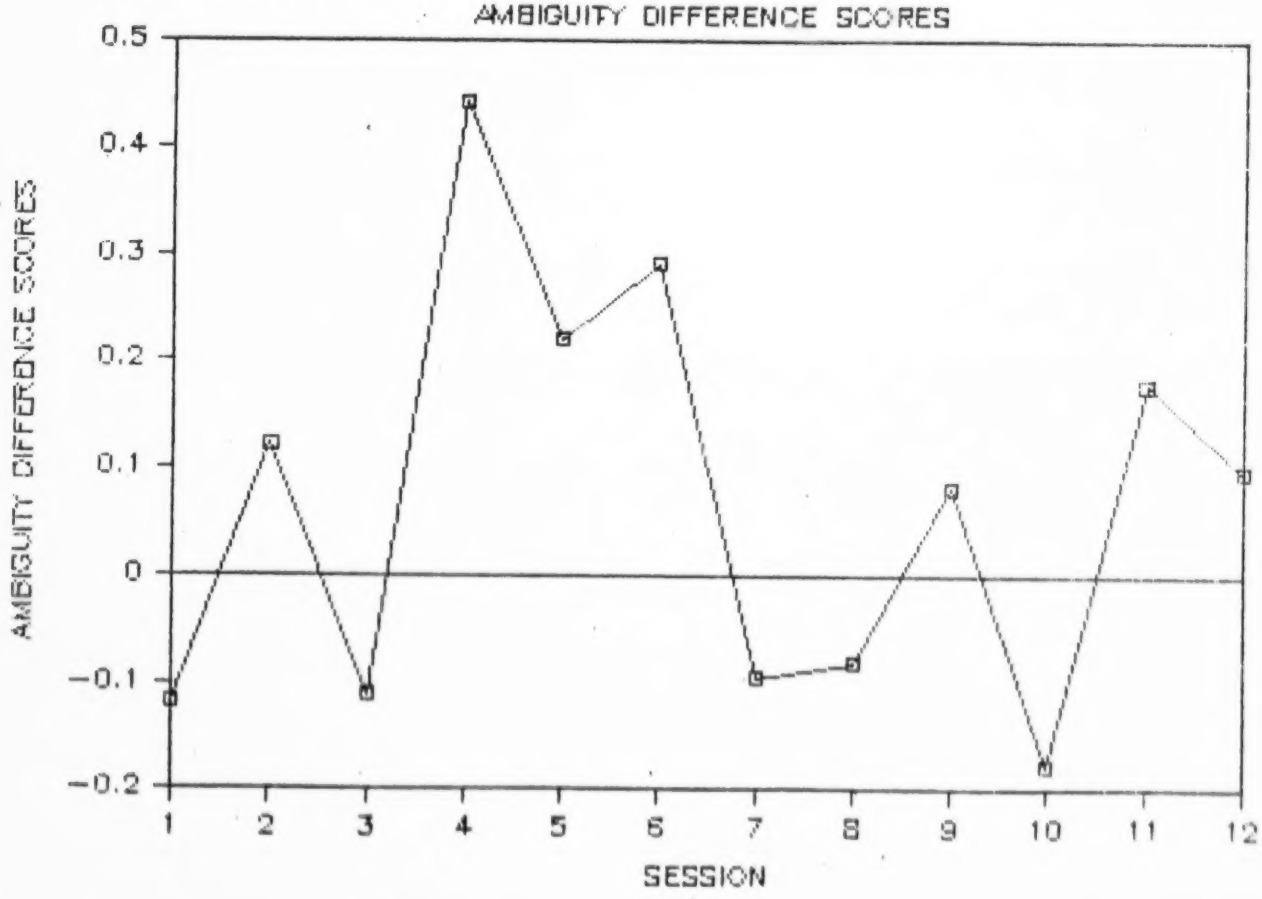
	Consequent Response		
Antecedent	One-up	One-across	One-down
Counselor		(Client)	
One-up	53 (.08)	145 (.24)	563 (.68)
One-across	60 (.03)	2090 (.75)	664 (.22)
One-down	12 (.07)	135 (.58)	84 (.35)
Client		(Counselor)	
One-up	37 (.32)	62 (.47)	27 (.21)
One-across	352 (.17)	1880 (.78)	121 (.05)
One-down	396 (.29)	869 (.65)	78 (.06)

Table 3

Counselor and client ambiguity scores and ambiguity difference scores across the 12 counseling interviews

Interview	Counselor Ambiguity	Client Ambiguity	Difference Score
1	.3931	.5113	-.1182
2	1.1528	1.0303	.1225
3	.9033	1.0146	-.1114
4	1.1650	.7219	.4431
5	1.0682	.8482	.2200
6	1.0870	.7956	.2914
7	.8434	.9390	.0956
8	.9458	1.0280	.0823
9	.8762	.7942	.0820
10	.7792	.9572	.1780
11	1.3241	1.1457	.1784
12	1.1011	1.0045	.0965

FIGURE 1



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